



Episode 9-10 - Strange Bedfellows

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"Shields at sixty percent," Tuvok called out over the din of the klaxons and the reports coming in from all stations of the ship. "And holding, Captain." No one needed to hear the unspoken 'for now' that hung in all their minds.

A lancing bolt of red energy sizzled through the blackness of space around them and Voyager pitched hard to starboard, smoke billowing up from the science station, filling the bridge with gray plumes that turned the atmosphere murky with the eerie red of the battle lighting.

Janeway looked towards Tuvok who nodded briefly and turned his attention back to the tactical reading he was collecting at his station. "Tuvok, keep on them with the pulse cannons. Mr. Paris, keep us moving. Don't give them a stationary target."

Simultaneous acknowledgements from both men preceded Voyager's wild spin and weave, a complex maneuver, intricate in its dimension and beautiful in its execution. At the same moment, Voyager's cannons burst forth with pulses of light, like petals from a deadly flower, unerringly connecting with the Scout ships. As

she clutched her seat, Janeway imagined the inertial dampeners hard pressed to keep up with Tom's maneuvering. If the situation weren't so dire that it would have been a thing of beauty to watch, but as it was she was grateful that Tom and Tuvok were earning their keep.

"They aren't coming at us with everything they've got." Kathryn looked at Chakotay. "They have us outnumbered and outgunned and they're playing with us." Her brow crinkled in concentration as Voyager took another hit despite Tom's wild ride. A small fire erupted at an unmanned console, as fire suppression systems activated filling the air with more acrid smoke.

"Shields at fifty percent and dropping, Captain," Tuvok called. "Attempting to stabilize them now."

"Damn, if only..." Kathryn's eyes widened and Chakotay knew she had a plan. "Janeway to Engineering..."

B'Elanna's voice filled the bridge, "Torres here, Captain. Oz and I are busy trying to reinforce shield integrity..."

"Understood... Is the battle separation sequence available?" Janeway coughed as the smoke began to take its toll.

There was a moment of silence from the half-Klingon engineer then she spoke, "I can't guarantee it will work, Captain. We've only run it in simulation..."

"Right now, I'll take what I can get. B'Elanna, prepare for battle separation. Get a team to the Saucer section's engineering. Tom when I give the order, straighten her out and pick up as much

speed as you can, make them think we're running for it. Chakotay, you, Harry, and Seven get to the battle bridge. Your target is the lead scout as soon as you are free of the saucer section."

Chakotay hesitated a moment, not really wanting to leave her side in a critical moment, but there was no choice. Both knew the other's fears intimately, but they both also knew their duty to the ship and the Federation outweighed their personal concerns. Their eyes met as he stood and he nodded. "Aye, Captain."

"Good luck, Commander." It was her Captain's voice that spoke these words as he lead the other two members of the senior staff to the turbolift. Chakotay grinned slightly as he watched the Captain stand and start barking out further orders. He had no doubts as to the outcome of this battle anymore.

The trio stepped into the turbolift and Harry called out their destination. "Battle bridge." The hum of the lift and an occasional explosion and lurch as Voyager was hit with another volley was the only thing to break the silence, each caught in their own thoughts. Chakotay watched the two junior officers approvingly. Harry and Seven showed no sign of allowing their personal relationship to color their reactions to the situation, despite the fact that several long conversations with Seven had revealed that she did fear for Harry's safety above her own. It was amazing just how much Kathryn and Seven were alike, even in aspects that he was certain Kathryn had never shared with Seven.

There was no further time for musing as the turbolift halted at the appropriate deck and disgorged them moving at a measured jog towards the battle bridge. Chakotay keyed in his access sequence and they moved into their positions, Harry at Ops, Seven at Tactical and Chakotay moving towards the helm. "Chakotay to Janeway. We're in position. You can commence separation at any time."

"Acknowledged, Commander," Janeway's voice sounded detached over the commlink.

Chakotay settled into the helm and looked across at Harry. "All right..."

"Perhaps, Commander," Oz's measured tones filtered through the battle bridge, "it would be better if you took command and left the piloting to me... After all, Voyager is *my* body for all intents and purposes."

Chakotay looked up, for a moment irrationally thinking his reputation for piloting disasters had somehow made it's way to the Sernaix shipmind. "Mr. Oz, did the Captain not request that you remained confined to Engineering?"

"In fact she did, but if this ship is destroyed then I cease to exist." Oz's voice was nonplussed. "Hence..."

Chakotay didn't have time for debate and being a part of the ship coupled with the fact that he had at one point in time been Sernaix probably would give them an advantage they needed in this case. "All right," he stood and moved back to centre seat. "Mr. Oz, you have the helm. Seven, is the Kep Cannon online?"

The former drone's eyebrow arched. "We have power to the cannon, though its use on a scout vessel is probably unwarr..."

Chakotay's glance silenced her without any words. It was obvious he wanted this battle finished so that they could provide support to the less heavily armed saucer section. "Seven, target that scout; Oz, bring us to bare on our target on my mark. Prepare for battle separation."

Almost as if he had ordered it, there was a lurch and they dropped free of the saucer section. The lower half of Voyager continued plummeting forward, taking the brunt of the Sernaix fire, especially from the ship that was maneuvering in front of them.

"Mark..."

It was like poetry in motion. Both sections for a split second continued on their forward course together, yet separate.

"Mr. Paris, cut forward thrust and reverse now." Janeway's voice echoed over the battle sounds.

Paris's eyebrow did a passable imitation of Tuvok as it found his hairline, then a grin spread across his face as he comprehended her motive. Inertial dampeners redlined in engineering as Voyager's saucer completed a perfect bootlegger's turn and brought all their forward weapons to bear on the Sernaix scout before them.

Tuvok, anticipating her next order, fired everything they could target on the scout in its current position. A full spread of torpedoes, blue and red dots like shooting stars, the Type-12 phasers, and the slowly firing phased energy beams, like a column of lava boiling towards their targets all converged on the Sernaix before them.

At the same moment, the lower section of Voyager swung around gracefully and the pulsing blue white beam of the Kep cannon spilled across the darkness and enveloped the other scout. The explosions seemed to happen in the same moment, the green luminescence of the black hulled monstrosities looked as though it enveloped them and then turned into a blinding blue green flash on their view screens.

Janeway moved back into her command chair and allowed herself a breath of relief as the damage reports started rolling in from all departments. A small crooked grin spread across her face. "Well done, everyone." She cast grateful glances at both Tom and Tuvok then tapped her communicator. "Janeway to Chakotay."

"Chakotay here, Captain." The disembodied voice of her first officer filled the bridge and Kathryn felt herself start to breathe again.

"Well done, Commander." She grinned again. "Now if you wouldn't mind bringing the half of my ship that you have custody of back here, we can commence with repairs."

The humor in his voice was very evident. "And here I thought this was my big chance for a ship of my very own. We'll be right with you, Captain."

Repairs to the ship were happening at a steady pace, damage control teams worked at top efficiency under B'Elanna's experienced hand. Having a full crew meant that the Captain and the First Officer no longer had to pitch in and help out, in fact now they would have been more of a hindrance than a help when compared to the extremely skilled Starfleet crews that buzzed about the ship, replacing, realigning and resealing every breach, short and problem they came across.

It wasn't any wonder to him that B'Elanna shooed him from engineering as he finished his tour of the ship, a habit left over from their days in the Delta Quadrant when both he and Kathryn would walk the length of the ship, surveying for themselves the damage left by a marauding alien species. The more things changed the more they stayed the same.

In his case at least.

It had surprised him when after asking B'Elanna if she had given the same speech to Kathryn, the half-Klingon's had shaken her head and told him that *he* was the only member of the command duo set on driving her insane today. He should have been relieved that Janeway's obsessive control compulsion didn't seem to have her in its clutches once more.

Should have been.

In this case, he had a bad feeling that that wasn't the case. "Computer, location of Captain Janeway."

He hoped to hear, 'Captain Janeway is in her quarters.' After all, their shifts were done and it was her turn to find something palatable to eat for dinner. Instead the computer's standard monotone echoed through the hall, "Captain Janeway is in Stellar Cartography."

Chakotay sighed slightly; he wasn't really surprised or disappointed. How could he be? This was essentially Kathryn. If he had expected her to change, he knew he wouldn't really have been in love with her. Instead he made his way towards Astrometrics -- he found it difficult to call it anything but that after their years on Voyager -- determined to do what he always did. He would draw her out, take her back to their cabin, feed her, and help her relax. By force, if necessary.

As he rounded the corner, his mind was so involved with formulating his arguments that he barely noticed the two crewmen carrying a couch that seemed to be on a course for Astrometrics as well. "A couch? Is someone moving and couldn't bare to leave this behind, gentlemen?" Chakotay's voice was bemused as he eyed the two non-commissioned officers in front of him.

"No, sir." They stopped for a moment to look at him. "The captain requested a couch in Stellar Cartography, sir." The man paused for a moment. "Why does she call it Astrometrics?"

"Old habit." Chakotay tugged his ear as he looked from the crewman to the couch. "Far be it from me to countermand her orders." He gestured to the hall ahead of him. "You gentlemen go on ahead." Picking up the couch they continued on their course, one of the two keying the door for admittance and the pair of them hauling the couch awkwardly up the ramp towards the main platform.

Janeway barely seemed to notice the pair as she watched dot after dot of greenish gold light appear on the holographic star map that surrounded them on all sides. The view was spectacular, like walking in space without need of a spacesuit, the only impediment to the illusion was the platform that jutted out into the twinkling blackness of the holographic presentation and the corresponding atmosphere and gravity.

The dots continued to fill the screen until only several small areas of blackness remained.

Though Kathryn seemed mesmerized she was well aware of the crewmen behind her. "Just set it there... In the middle of the platform." She gestured absently, not really paying attention to the crewmen behind her. After a moment, she seemed to realize her negligence and looked at its positioning. Kathryn turned her attention on the two men, giving them a reassuring smile. "Thank you... That's exactly what I needed." She acknowledged their effort on her behalf graciously. "Dismissed."

Both the men nodded to her and made their way down the ramp, nodding to Chakotay as they exited. "Computer, reset and rerun tactical analysis." Kathryn's voice echoed in the mostly empty room as she settled back on the couch, laying on her back so she could get the full effect of the program as the multitude of green yellow dots once again began to fill the screen. "Chakotay, are you joining me or are you just going to sit there and watch?" Her voice filtered down to him from her place above him.

Shaking his head slightly, he made his way up the ramp to the platform, and came to a spot beside the couch. "If you had an urge to sleep under the stars tonight, Kathryn, I think the holodeck and our recreation of New Earth would have been nicer." He refrained from pointing out that she could have simply ordered the computer to provide her with a holographic couch. Discretion after all was the better part of valor.

"You know I don't do camping, Commander, and my hair isn't long enough anymore where I can afford to spare some for kindling." Kathryn's voice was teasing then became serious once more. "There's a pattern here, Chakotay. I'm just not seeing it."

Chakotay looked up at the rapidly filling star map. "With the Sernaix, Kathryn, I am not certain there *is* a pattern."

"They're powerful, Chakotay, but to squander their resources like this..." She gestured across the star map. "And this is only the Delta Quadrant. I can't imagine what they're doing in the Alpha Quadrant."

Chakotay could hear the stress in her voice. Being stuck out here once more, held back behind enemy lines, had taken its toll on her. Each time they made an attempt to rejoin their comrades at arms in the Alpha Quadrant they were thwarted by Sernaix. He wasn't even certain any more whether it was a plan on the part of their relentless enemy or just bad luck. "The Alpha Quadrant has all of Starfleet, the Cardassians, the Romulans and the Klingons defending it. Not to mention every other fleet that can be brought to bear against them. They can hold their own."

"Can they, Chakotay?" Kathryn shook her head. "Computer, re-run analysis again." They both watched as the screen steadily, with frightening rapidity, filled with the ominous green yellow dots. She looked at him once more, the fear evident in her eyes before the Captain's mask once again reasserted itself.

When he admitted it to himself, Kathryn had a point. This was the quadrant that had nearly killed them more times than he could count. Yet the Sernaix seemed to be overtaking it with frightening speed. He turned slowly watching as the entire map was engulfed slowly and steadily. "Computer, freeze analysis." He felt Kathryn's eyes on him. "Go to time index zero zero eight nine point five and continue." His eyes focused on one area of space. "Maybe the pattern isn't where they are attacking..."

Janeway nodded and finished the sentence, standing and moving to his side. "... but where they aren't. Computer replay from time index zero zero eight nine point five again." She slowly turned as she took in all views of the starscape. "Three areas have no current Sernaix activity." She pointed to her right. "The Void."

"Fairly obvious why not," Chakotay commented and Janeway nodded in agreement.

"The Northwest Passage..." Both their eyes trained on the blank spot where they knew fluidic space and species 8472 reigned.

Chakotay shook his head. "Computer, reverse analysis." He pointed out where the occasional dot of Sernaix activity appeared in the Passage. "There is activity there, it's just slow."

"Which means either Species 8472 are giving them hell or they are having difficulties with fluidic space." Janeway sighed slightly. "Either way the Sernaix are occupying themselves elsewhere for now." Her attention focused on the other blank spot. "Why not there?"

Closing his eyes for a moment, Chakotay tried to remember anything special about that sector of space. "Nothing native. There were a few civilizations in that corridor, but nothing more

technologically advanced than the Federation. Certainly nothing that could hold them off on their own."

"You're right." Janeway's eyes narrowed. "So it's not something native to that area, but it's definitely holding them at bay." Her face took on a look of intense concentration. "What if everything that was in the bubble universe came out at the same time that the Sernaix started popping up everywhere?" She turned her attention on Chakotay. "We know that the Sernaix wouldn't confront the Ayrethans. What if that's where Ayretha ended up?"

Chakotay could see the hope in her eyes. "It's possible, of course, Kathryn. It could also be something else. Maybe that's where what's left of the Borg have situated themselves."

"No, they were having as much difficulty with the Sernaix as we are." Janeway straightened. "Chakotay, we need to call a staff meeting immediately..."

Chakotay shook his head and took one of her hands in his. "No, we don't." Kathryn turned a baleful gaze on him even though he kept his tone moderate. "B'Elanna is just about to go off shift after a hell of a day. Harry is still having difficulties controlling that Sernaix body shield, especially when he's run down and Voyager won't be ready to be underway for another ten hours." He paused for a moment seeing the frustration playing in her eyes. "We're in a relatively safe area of space, under cloak. There isn't anything that will be gained by jumping on this now, Kathryn, so unless you are going to make it an order I am going to take you back to our cabin, feed you dinner, and run you a hot bath. That way you'll be on top of everything and in peak shape to keep us alive another day in the Delta Quadrant."

Thoughts were running through her brain at the speed of light, pushing her to force the issue, make it an order, and run full steam ahead. Instead she considered his words carefully. Ten hours ahead and not being at peak readiness when they went into the unknown or wait the ten hours and walk into the situation in top running condition. He was right and Janeway knew it. So as she felt the gentle tug on her hand from his, she did the unthinkable.

"All right, but I want coffee ice cream and strawberries and it's coming out of your rations." She moved down the ramp, pulling him in her wake.

Chakotay shook his head slightly, bemused at her turn around. "Kathryn, there aren't any replicator rations any more."

Janeway turned and grinned, allowing her playful side to show slightly, an acknowledgement that technically they were off duty, "... but it's more fun to pretend there are."

Data flowed around Oz in a stream of alphanumeric codes. Caught in a digital current of information, he went where it took him. He saw -- was it even possible to see on such a completely different plane? -- data packages and flow regulation. Oz's mind worked hard to distinguish between the sets of numbers and letters. Islands of set files existed everywhere that contained the programming of all the tasks that were conceivably carried out by the ship's systems.

It was vast.

The file groups were connected by countless data streams, gigaquads of data applied to solve problems by the constantly developing computer. Some of the data streams were more important: sometimes they cut off the others when an override was entered into the mainframe. Areas of the artificial reality lit up and darkened from time to time as power was redirected and regrouped - a

little taken from the replicators to power the shields, a little taken from the unused cargo bay recyclers to boost the efficiency of the environmental controls.

There was movement everywhere as Voyager carried out the commands entered by the crew - a course correction here, an activated replicator there. The automated functions performed by Voyager were repeated streams of instructions controlled by the computer.

At first when Oz had taken up residence in the system, he had been overwhelmed. The sheer noise had been intense -- not physical, since after all, what ears did he have in a place such as this? -- but the force of the tightly harnessed energy was almost too much to handle at once. Not that he would allow any of the humanoids to ever know it but he had fled in terror, stumbling through system after system, disrupting power and blocking commands accidentally until he found a relatively peaceful place. His panic had stemmed mainly from the fear that his awareness would be overpowered by the relentless flood of foreign algorithms and codes. Now he was able to spend long periods at a stretch in Voyager's systems after becoming accustomed to the blare before needing to go back to the Sernaix systems for a rest.

There was a small tug on his consciousness. He looked around for the source and realized that a member of Voyager's crew was trying to contact him through the comm system. The vocal command was translated into wave data and transmitted through the systems until it reached him. He connected himself to the comm link and answered.

"You rang." Oz's disembodied voice, more baritone than normal, echoed through Engineering.

The Doctor sighed at the shipmind's off sense of humour. Sometimes he thought Oz took lessons from Tom Paris. "You wished to speak with me, Oz?" He was glad they were off in Engineering, away from the patients recovering from their injuries incurred in the last battle with the Sernaix.

"As one non-corporeal computer based life form to another... Yes." Oz's voice remodulated back to its normal tones. "Please, make yourself comfortable." The shipmind fell silent until the Doctor had seated himself at an empty engineering console. "I have been pondering the possibility of becoming more a member of this crew. As you pointed out, my previous attempt failed because I made them uncomfortable with me. You said it would take time for them to adjust to my presence. However, it occurred to me that they would never acknowledge my presence as long as I was confined to Engineering as a disembodied voice."

The Doctor nodded, accepting the shipmind's assertion and remembered his own difficulties until Kes had intervened on his behalf. Perhaps it was time to repay Kes' kindness by doing the same for another. "I can see your point, Oz, but the Captain has requested that you remain in Engineering."

"Do you think she would change her mind if I were to limit my exploration of the ship and my interaction with the rest of the crew to what I could do in a holographic body?" Oz's voice sounded almost hopeful.

Another holographic life form on board Voyager. The possibilities of having someone else like himself were intriguing to say the least. The Doctor went over the Captain's complaints previous about the shipmind then nodded briefly. "Yes, I believe she might agree to that, Oz." The Doctor continued his ruminations, considering the permutations of Oz taking on a holographic body. "Of course the form you choose could have an impact on their acceptance of you and just being in a corporeal body won't assure you acceptance."

"Of course, but it would be a step in the right direction..." Oz remembered the words spoken to him after his first foray outside of Engineering. "Even if only a baby step."

The Doctor grinned slightly. The shipmind did learn and very quickly it seemed. He stood and tapped his communicator. "EMH to Commander Chakotay."

"Chakotay here... Go ahead, Doctor."

The Doctor took a deep, but unnecessary breath, and spoke. "Oz and I would like to speak to you, Commander. He has a request in regards to becoming more integrated with the rest of the crew and I find myself in agreement with him."

There was a moment of silence, then Chakotay's voice returned sounding cautiously curious. "All right, Doctor. You and Oz come to my office. I'll authorize him leaving Engineering for the moment."

The Doctor found himself looking upwards for no readily explainable reason and smiling as though Oz would be aware of him. Of course he wouldn't, or would he? It would be a fascinating line of conversation for them to go down once they'd convinced the Commander and the Captain that the Shipmind's holographic body was a good idea. "You heard the Commander, Oz."

"Yes. I'm there already... Just waiting for you." The shipmind's voice filtered down to him.

The Doctor rolled his eyes and made his way out of Engineering.

The senior officers filed into the briefing room. Two shifts passed since the breakup of the battle between Voyager and the Sernaix; Lieutenant Torres had returned to the last of the repairs as soon as she had awoken, only having been pulled from Engineering by the appearance of her insistent husband and giggling daughter. Now she had again been pulled from her shift to attend. There was still a smudge of grime on her cheek and before she sat down in her customary seat, Tom wiped it away for her as he passed her on his way to his own place. Captain Janeway stood at the head of the table, her posture straight and purposeful. She locked gazes with each of them, reassuring them with her eyes alone before beginning the briefing.

"All right, people. First things first. What's Voyager's status?"

Torres cleared her throat. "There's some buckling along the starboard hull. Shields are being repaired; they should be up to full working capacity in..." She did a quick calculation in her head. "Three hours. More if we're attacked again." There was a collective exhalation of relief. There was less damage in this battle, for which they could be thankful. Torres continued her report and gave Janeway a summary of the repair schedule and estimates. Janeway nodded her approval. She listened to the reports from the other areas of the ship and the other members of the senior staff waited patiently, but it was clear that everyone was waiting for the crucial issue to be addressed. The empty area of space, free of Sernaix activity, was tantalizing to them all. After the grueling ordeal of a state of war, they were eager for respite and Janeway could not blame them for being distracted.

"Now. About this area of space... Thoughts?"

Tuvok, ever logical, was the first to speak up. "There are several likely suppositions that could be made from the presence of a space free of Sernaix activity. One is that there is some sort of anomaly that is preventing ships from passing through that area of space. Another is that our scanners are not detecting anything. The third..."

Tom Paris broke in. "The third is that there's a force there that's even stronger than the Sernaix. Maybe the Ayrethans." Janeway smiled as Tom voiced her own thoughts on the matter.

Tuvok raised an eyebrow and nodded, not at all discomfited by the interruption. The tips of Tom's ears, however, turned slightly pink as he realized his indiscretion.

"The question is - should we investigate it?" Janeway looked at all of them carefully, gauging their reactions.

Torres looked at her, stunned. "How can we not? I mean, it could be our ticket to survival!"

"We don't know that, Lieutenant. For all we know, it could be a trap staged by the Sernaix to lure us into an unprotected position. We have to consider all the possibilities."

Seven straightened in her chair, addressing Torres. "It is impossible to calculate the odds of such a possibility. There is not enough data to form a hypothesis. However..." This time she looked to Janeway. "I would recommend that we stay away from the area until we are able to determine whether or not the area is truly safe."

Janeway looked thoughtful. She glanced at Commander Chakotay. "Any input would be appreciated."

Chakotay took a deep breath. He had been listening to the back and forth with some interest and now he met her gaze with his customary steadiness. He knew Kathryn's views on the area from their discussions in Astrometrics and it was time to do what he did best.

"I think we should take a look. If it's the base of the Aryethans, we can't afford to miss the opportunity. All we've seen from the Sernaix so far is superior firepower and good battle strategy, but we haven't seen anything as subtle as a complex plan to lure us in. At least, not like this. As long as we anticipate the fact that there may be a trap and as long as we plan for it, I think we can go ahead. After all, it's only a matter of time."

Tuvok inclined his head; his argument was eminently logical and in fact prudent when it came down to reality.

Janeway nodded slowly, grateful once again for Chakotay's unwavering support. "I'm inclined to agree. It's better than a game of cat and mouse. I don't want to be forever second-guessing every opportunity we might have." It was not in her nature to sit still and the same could be said of her command style. She slipped easily into her seat at the head of the conference table. "All right. Let's do it. What's next?"

There was an instant feeling of energy, an uplifting of spirits around the table. Finally, there was a glimmer of hope.

"Oz." Chakotay, dealing with the personnel issues, brought up the matter of the shipmind.

"Yes, Commander?" Janeway looked at him expectantly, but it was the Doctor who answered.

"He's been considering taking corporeal form. He doesn't want to be restricted to the computer and he'd like to join the crew in a more... everyday... capacity."

It was cautiously couched -- the Doctor was clearly cagey about his own involvement in the matter, and not just because Oz was potentially a security risk. Tuvok stiffened almost imperceptibly in his seat, communicating his reservations without having to say a word. She thought about it for a few long moments, her gaze fixed on the smooth, almost silky glass of the table. She met the Doctor's gaze. As a hologram, he was particularly sensitive to these matters and she understood how important it was to him that another, similar being should be given the same rights. By the same token, there was an issue of security that could not be ignored. Could

they trust the shipmind to roam the ship freely? As she remembered the last incident with Oz, she realized finally that it was a moot point.

"I don't see why not."

Tuvok frowned slightly. "Captain, I would be remiss in my duties if I did not warn you of the security risks posed by the shipmind."

"I know, Tuvok. It could be dangerous to us. But consider for a moment... Oz already has more or less free rein in our computer system. If he wanted to move against us, he could have by now. He's been staying in Engineering by my order, essentially acknowledging my command and this way he'll be limited to the awareness that his holographic body provides." Janeway took some pleasure in knowing that Oz would no longer be able to cause the havoc he did last time he had tried integrating with the crew.

Tuvok nodded, but he still seemed troubled at the prospect of a corporeal Sernaix on board. He was too well disciplined, however, to allow this concern to show or indeed to question his captain's judgment in public.

"Lieutenant Torres, is it plausible?"

B'Elanna shrugged. "I don't see why not. We have holographic projectors everywhere on the ship; it's just a case of installing them in quarters if he wants them."

"Good. Oz is no longer confined to Engineering on the condition that he spends most of his time in his holographic body. Doctor, help Oz with the holodeck so that he can design a body for himself - you're probably the best qualified. Commander, I want you to assign him quarters and deal with any other questions that might come up. It is, after all, a personnel issue." She stood and looked around the briefing room. "If there's nothing else..."

No one had anything further to add. "Tom, set a course for the empty sector, warp six. Dismissed." She waited for them all to file out, resting her hand on the back of her seat. She looked out of the view port for a few, long moments, her gaze faraway and focused on the many points of light as she thought about her crew and what they had become. A smooth, coordinated group... and her friends.

She staggered as a heavy blow rocked the ship. She glanced out again; they were still in normal space. Tom had clearly not guided Voyager into warp yet. Her heart sank and she strode out on to the bridge.

"Report!" She hung on to the rail as another bone-jarring jolt pitched the ship sharply. Tuvok was already reading off the details from his console.

"Three Sernaix scouts, heavily armed. We are surrounded. Our shields are down to eighty-three percent and falling."

Janeway could imagine B'Elanna's ire down in Engineering. "On screen. Evasive maneuvers." Pointless. Tom was already executing some effective twists and turns. "Full spread of quantum torpedoes, three four three formation in both directions..." Some of the torpedoes hit the Sernaix ships. The Sernaix ships began their inevitable dance, circling Voyager like birds of prey as they pecked the lone ship to death. Little by little, Voyager's shields lost power. Tom tried, once again, to match the skilful piloting of the Sernaix ships and combining his talent with Tuvok's skills, Voyager had a formidable team. It was not enough, however, as the ship continued to shudder under the onslaught of the Sernaix. As Tom guided the ship into a corkscrew roll, there was a stomach-churning moment before the computer compensated for the movement and the picture on the viewscreen steadied. Janeway ignored it and continued to snap out orders.

"Shields down to thirty-nine percent," stated Tuvok.

Janeway's stomach twisted. "And the Sernaix ships?"

"Approximately seventy-three percent."

They would outlast the Voyager. Not necessarily by much once Voyager was finished, but that would hardly matter once her ship was reduced to spinning debris.

Like hell.

Seven, operating the phase cannons, found a weak spot in the Sernaix shields and partially crippled one of the scouts. Oz's voice suddenly piped up through the comm system, making Janeway jump slightly.

"The female of the species is often deadlier than the male. Even in your species," he observed. The Doctor had obviously had time to give Oz the news that he was no longer confined to Engineering. Neither Seven nor Janeway were especially amused. Janeway leaned forward, as if she could reach into the viewscreen and destroy one of the alien ships herself.

Impossibly, she saw an opening between two of the ships.

"Tom..."

"I see it."

As if on cue, there was a horrendous explosion and Janeway was tossed from her seat. She hit her head on the deck and she tasted blood in her mouth. She looked sideways and saw that Chakotay had not fared much better. He took her arm and helped her up, then settled back heavily in his chair.

"Don't tell me that we just lost warp power."

Tuvok's voice was relentless.

"Warp engines in the drive section are offline."

She frowned, her eyes dark with anger.

"All right. We're going to separate the saucer section... Will a warp core explosion at this range disable them?" This time it wouldn't be to even the odds but to use the drive section as a weapon.

She could see Chakotay from the corner of her eye radiating anxiety. Tom's back was rigid as he continued trying to evade the rapid-fire of the three ships.

"There is an eighty percent chance that they will be disabled."

"I'll take it. Prepare to-"

"Captain, fifteen ships just dropped out of warp." There was astonishment in Harry Kim's voice as he looked at the readouts.

"Sernaix?"

"No... they're..." He doubled-checked. "Vidiian. Kazon. Krenim. And Devore."

She turned her head to look at him in incredulity. "What?"

"They're firing at the Sernaix."

"Tom, evasive pattern delta four." The ship rolled sharply to starboard, firing a volley of quantum torpedoes. Janeway clung to the arms of her seat as the inertial dampeners struggled to compensate. There was a blinding flash as the Devore and Kazon weapons made quick work of one of the Sernaix ships. There was a faint spatial distortion as another tore a hole in subspace and jumped to warp. The third did not fare quite so well. Voyager fired once more simultaneously with the Krenim ship and a moment later, the enemy ship was vaporized.

"Tuvok."

"Shields at twenty-two percent and holding. Hull breaches on decks four and sixteen. Minor hull fractures on decks five, six and eight. Warp engines are offline. Forward starboard phaser banks are inoperative."

"Janeway to Engineering. Status?"

B'Elanna's voice was tense. "Warp engines are shot. Eight hours, maybe more. Shields in five hours. Phasers... maybe three, there isn't that much damage. Damage control is already on the hull breaches."

"Get on it. Janeway out." She knew that she sounded terse and aggressive but at the moment, courtesy was secondary. "Hail them, Mr. Kim."

"Which one, Captain?"

It was a legitimate question. She opened her mouth to answer when he interrupted.

"We're being hailed by three of them. A Vidiian, a Krenim, and a Devore ship."

"On screen, four way." This would enable the Vidiian, the Devore and Krenim commanders to converse with her and each other at the same time. She settled back in her seat, swiping at an errant strand of hair. She winced as her fingers encountered a cut on her forehead. She lifted her chin as the screen flickered to life. She had to conceal her surprise when the pale and striking features of Kashyk, the Devore inspector, appeared on one third of the monitor. On another third was a Krenim commander whom she had never met and finally the twisted countenance of the Vidiian commander.

"Captain." Kashyk's voice was as silky-smooth as ever. She stood, her hands clasped easily behind her back.

"Inspector."

"Once again, I've left that title behind."

"Clearly." She encompassed both him and the other commander in her gaze. "Thank you for your assistance. We were getting desperate."

They inclined their heads.

"May I assume from your timely and synchronized appearance that you're working together?" she asked, her gaze switching from one to the other. They nodded.

Kashyk leaned forward. "Greetings from the Alliance, Captain Janeway." There was something faintly deprecating in his voice, but she ignored it in favor of getting answers. The Krenim commander spoke up.

"I suggest a meeting. There's much we must discuss with you, Captain."

She drew a cautious breath.

"Our briefing room in one hour?" At their assent, she hesitated for a moment. There was a silence and then she suggested, "Perhaps you'd like to bring a representative from the Kazon as well."

There was an almost imperceptible pause and the Krenim said matter-of-factly, "Yes. Thank you for your consideration. Talat out." His side of the screen blanked out and she turned her head to one side to share a glance with Chakotay out of Kashyk's sight, quirking one eyebrow ever so slightly. She returned her attention to the viewscreen. The Vidiian nodded his assent as well and broke communications.

"One hour... Captain...?" she asked questioningly. Kashyk nodded, confirming the title and the invitation. He touched somewhere to the left of the screen and her viewer darkened. Chakotay stood and moved beside her.

"Interesting team," he observed mildly.

"Isn't it..." She sighed. "Well, I suppose we'll see in an hour."

"After you get that looked at." He looked pointedly at her forehead.

She sighed in mild exasperation. "All right."

"I'll try not to crash us."

She shot him a look that could only be called caustic as she strode out. He shook his head and grinned, then sat down in the center seat to begin working with Engineering on a repair schedule and inventory.

Janeway strode into the briefing room, followed by Chakotay, Tuvok and the four aliens, all escorted by armed security guards. Talat endured the Kazon's presence with obvious reluctance and it was apparent that he was there by Janeway's sufferance only. She gestured for them to be seated and her seat at the head of the briefing room table.

"This is Captain Fedrek Lem. He is the leader of the Vidiian contingent in our Alliance." Kashyk motioned to the Vidiian as he settled in his chair and nodded to Janeway. She looked at them expectantly. Kashyk picked up on the silent reproof and cast a sidelong glance at the Kazon.

"And this is Maje Haron from the Relora."

"We've met before." Janeway's eyes narrowed ever so slightly as she cast her mind back to her old ship's difficult years in the Delta Quadrant.

"Yes." The word was almost a snarl as the Kazon evidently remembered the encounter as well, when the Trabe had used Janeway's goodwill to try to exterminate all the First Majes of the Kazon sects.

Kashyk was unconcerned. "Good... Then we have no further need for introductions. Captain, our reason for being here is simple. We believe that your new ship would be a valuable addition to the Alliance fleet."

He, Talat, and the Vidiian exchanged a glance. By tacit consent, Talat continued instead of him. "We know that you've had encounters before with the Sernaix before and therefore your tactical knowledge would be useful in defending ourselves against them."

The look in the Kazon's eyes became almost covetous as Voyager was mentioned and Janeway stored away that observation for future reference. It appeared that the Kazon had not changed much over the last years, despite the bad situation with the Sernaix.

Her gaze fastened on Kashyk. "You know what my next question will be."

His lips curved in a slightly dry smile. "Naturally. What do you get out of it?"

"Precisely."

"Simply put, our protection. You've just seen what we can do."

"Indeed we have. Now... How do we know that you won't use your superior firepower against us?"

"We're stronger with you than without you," Haron pointed out. There was still the gleam in his eyes that Janeway did not entirely like, but at this point she had to trust that even if he lacked the self-control to restrain himself from attacking Voyager, the other leaders would keep him in line. She paused for a few seconds, her mind working through the possibilities.

"All right... I'd like a few minutes to confer with my officers." She focused on Kashyk briefly. "You know the way to my ready room," she said with a faintly ironic edge to her voice. He nodded, and strode confidently out, his head held high. He did not seem at all discomfited by the presence of the armed security guards with him while the other three seemed to see it as an indignity. She looked after Kashyk, her gaze lingering on his back for just a moment before she returned her attention to her officers.

"Opinions?"

"It would seem to be an equitable exchange," Tuvok stated. Janeway, however, could hear his reservations beneath the words. She understood: she had her own reservations. She was quiet for a few minutes, caught in her thoughts.

Chakotay was struck by how her eyes darkened a little when she was concentrating, flickering a little as if reading something at high speed as she thought about the circumstances.

It was interesting how even in their 'Alliance' the different races tended to stick to fighting alongside their own kind. It reminded her that it was formed out of necessity, not out of friendship. Interesting also that the Kazon had not hailed them. The balance of power was fairly obvious and she could not say that she particularly liked it. Not, of course, that they necessarily had any better options.

"Chakotay?"

"Kashyk seems as high-handed as ever. I still want to throw him in the brig."

She chuckled softly and shook her head. "At this point, I don't think that would be conducive to a smooth working relationship, do you? Although I have to say that I sympathize with that sentiment."

Chakotay smiled and some of his tension dissipated. "For what it's worth, Captain, I think it's the best offer we're likely to get. We just have to be prepared for another betrayal."

"If it comes to that," she commented. "Which I don't think it will. But you're right, we have to be ready. Tuvok, I want constant surveillance whenever they're on board and continuous scans of the ships even when they're not. If they so much as misplace a communicator I want to know about it."

"Aye, Captain."

She rose and the two men rose with her.

"Dismissed."

Chakotay and Tuvok followed her out of the briefing room. Tuvok took his station immediately. Chakotay went with Janeway into the ready room. She faced the four captains.

"Gentlemen, we have decided to join your Alliance, but you've caught us in the middle of a mission, one which we can't afford to shelve right now."

"May we know what that mission is?" Talat was elaborately polite compared to the terseness of before.

"Suffice to say, I believe that we've found an area of space that's clear of Sernaix activity and may be where the Ayrethans, a long term enemy of theirs, are located." She shoved aside the feeling that she was telling them too much, but conceded to herself that she would eventually have to share that information with them. "We were about to investigate. If you like, we can part company until we have finished..."

"That won't be necessary," interrupted Talat. "We will escort you."

She exchanged a look with Chakotay. He intervened.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible. From everything we've experienced, we believe that the Ayrethans are wary of direct encounters and the mission would be for nothing if a large fleet showed up on their doorstep."

Kashyk, Talat, and the Vidiian looked at each other and seemed to come to some sort of accord. "Captain Kashyk will accompany you. We can't afford to take risks."

She kept her gaze fixed on Kashyk, who met her look steadily, his eyes shining darkly.

"You understand."

"Better than anyone," she replied, and his lips twisted almost boyishly in a wry smile.

"Perhaps we'll be spending more time together than we thought," he observed.

Feeling Chakotay straighten a little beside her, she inclined her head noncommittally. "Perhaps."

Kashyk smiled slightly and contacted his ship briefly from her terminal, placing his second-in-command in charge of his ship for the moment. There would be a general rendezvous with Voyager some days later when he could rejoin his ship. Until then they were stuck with him.

They walked back in silence to the transporter room. Janeway walked alongside Kashyk after dismissing his guard while Talat, Haron and Lem were accompanied by their security escorts. Chakotay brought up the rear -- just in case.

Janeway nodded graciously to the captains as they stepped up on to the transporter platform. "Until next time, gentlemen."

They nodded and she made a gesture to the transporter officer to engage the transporters. She turned back to Kashyk and Chakotay. Before she could say anything, Kashyk stepped forward. "Captain, I was hoping that you might give me a tour of your new ship." She hesitated, then nodded. She glanced at Chakotay.

"Commander, would you care to accompany--"

"Doctor to Commander Chakotay."

He kept his eyes fixed on Janeway as he answered the call.

"Chakotay here."

"Commander, I... That is, Oz and I would appreciate it if you could meet with us in Engineering to discuss possibilities for Oz's quarters and other such matters."

He nodded, even though the Doctor could not see him. "Of course, Doctor. I'll be right there." He looked at Janeway, a silent question in his eyes.

"It's all right, Chakotay. Go. I'll give the Captain his tour."

He nodded, turned, went out.

She made a quick call to the bridge to order the conn officer to set a course for the blank area of space. Then she returned her attention to Kashyk.

"This way, Captain."

He followed her out of the transporter room and fell into step beside her as they walked down the corridor together. Their first stop was the shuttle bay: she was working up to the more vital systems. She did not want to jump the gun and show him the heart of Voyager in Engineering. At least, not until she had a better feel of what his intentions were.

Instead of paying attention to her explanation of the functions of the various systems, he faced her. His hand strayed close to her arm as if about to physically turn her to look at him as he said, "It's been a long time, Kathryn."

She met his gaze carefully. "Are we going to stand here and trade pithy clichés or are we going deal with the next crisis out here in the Delta Quadrant?"

"That's what I like about you, Kathryn. You're so businesslike."

"And I thought it was my humanity."

He let out a breath of amusement. "You *do* remember."

"How could I forget?"

"I thought we were going to deal with the next crisis and not trade pithy clichés."

Her smile was dry and held a grudging humour. "You and the Krenim are fairly well matched. I am assuming that one or the other of you have developed technology to allow you to cross the Delta Quadrant with ease." Kashyk's bemused countenance told her she was on target. "The Vidiians offer knowledge. They were well known as great scientists even before the Phage decimated them." Again no answer, which was an answer in and of itself. "So what do the Kazon offer?" she asked bluntly. Her eyes narrowed as she watched him, trying to work out how the Devore, the Vidiians, and the Krenim gained from such a lopsided alliance.

He simply stared at her.

Her eyes widened in understanding.

"They're the shock troops... the expendable soldiers."

"You understand."

"That's barbaric."

"No, that's necessity," he corrected. "Casualties of war."

"It's unequal."

"As in every hierarchy."

"I don't want to be a party to that. It goes against every principle I stand for."

"It's interesting that it's 'I' stand for rather than 'we'... particularly as we were speaking of a hierarchy just then. What if your crew does not agree? At any rate, I thought you -- What was the phrase? -- were 'willing to face the music' at the end."

"People change."

"Not that much."

"Perhaps." She looked at him measuringly. "Why should I take part in such an obviously disproportionate alliance?"

There was a hint of satisfaction in his voice as he offered her the obvious response. "You have no choice, Captain."

Her mouth turned down slightly at the corners and she looked away, conceding the point for the moment. There was a pause and she could feel his gaze fixed on her.

"Do you trust me, Kathryn?"

It was an old dance and they both knew the steps. "Not for a second."

"Nor do I trust you. The fact remains that we're in the same fix, whether or not you want to acknowledge it."

"What about working side by side with telepaths?" She watched his reaction carefully. He remained stoic.

"I've learned that concessions have to be made. Including working with telepaths." Despite his composure, the word had an edge to it, almost as if it were distasteful to say.

It had to be enough. She could not police his thoughts, and as long as he was not overtly aggressive towards her crew she would have to accept the fact that he was not a reformed Devore representative. She simply nodded and led the way to the next area of her ship.

Chakotay strode into Engineering. There was tension in his shoulders and he rolled them surreptitiously to ease the stiffness. He caught sight of Lieutenant Torres pouring over the data on a console and cleared his throat. She looked up. They spent a few minutes talking quietly about the technical viability providing Oz with a stable holographic form. If B'Elanna noticed the conflict in her friend, she did not comment on it. When he was satisfied on all counts, he looked around for the Doctor and found him standing near the warp core, deep in conversation with Oz. He nodded a greeting to him and tilted his chin up slightly in address to Oz, an unconscious gesture and an unnecessary one, since Oz could hear him perfectly well without Chakotay raising his voice.

Chakotay raised his voice.

"Hello, Oz."

"Good evening, Commander."

Was it evening already?

"The Captain has approved your request for a body and I'm here to discuss the possibilities with you."

Oz sounded mildly amused.

"Indeed, Commander. I've been giving it a lot of thought lately..."

Chakotay felt a little sorry for the shipmind. He probably should have thought about this sooner, since Oz had been cooped up for some time before they even considered allowing him beyond the confines of the Sernaix systems.

"So I've heard. Now that we've decided to allow you to take corporeal form..." He felt downright embarrassed now. Who had the right to deny a corporeal form to an entity?

"...I think I'm within my rights to authorize assignment of quarters to you should you wish it."

"I wish it, Commander!" Oz sounded particularly excited; Chakotay was increasingly aware of the fact that despite his previous experience as a corporeal being with the Sernaix, their social hierarchy was not theirs, Oz was still comparatively new to social interactions and therefore had less experience than most humans. Chakotay inclined his head, though Oz could not see it.

"Lieutenant Torres has been looking into what will be required to maintain a stable holographic body for you and I am satisfied that there is no threat to your safety." Voyager's, however, was a different matter. "Nevertheless, having said that, there are some rules that you must follow. You will have restricted access to Voyager's key areas and of course you will respect the crew's privacy. Being *able* to go everywhere doesn't mean that you *should* go everywhere."

Chakotay felt almost as if he were a schoolteacher giving a lecture... or the Doctor holding one of his lessons in social graces.

"Aye, Commander."

"Doctor, you will continue to work with Oz... Help him to find a body and settle in."

"Yes, Commander. It will be a pleasure." The Doctor was fairly beaming at him. Clearly there was more than a small feeling of sympathy between them. Chakotay smiled at him, finding that he enjoyed seeing the fresh optimism after so many weeks of stress and anxiety. He took his leave of them and left them to their exploration.

The Doctor, after a few moments of conferring with Oz, transferred himself to the holodeck.

Chakotay entered the ready room. His shoulders fell as he released the professional mask that he had been wearing for the past hours. He sat down on the couch next to the viewport, resting his hands on his knees for a few minutes as he ran through a centering exercise. Ordinarily in such circumstances, when time was not so short, he usually went on a vision quest or even just meditated to work through his feelings and find out what was bothering him. Never, however, had there been less of a need to do so.

He was uneasy with Kashyk's presence, it was as simple as that. He would have liked to say that he was impartial in the matter and that he was purely concerned for the well being of Voyager and her crew, but he could not. He had noted the former inspector's attitude to Kathryn and he did not like it.

He smiled inwardly. Some things never changed, even with hundreds of years of development, both technological and social. Humans continued to be touchy about their relationships and he was no exception. He would just have to deal with it as best he could and maintain a professional attitude. After all, he was a Starfleet officer, and it was what she would like. Not that he doubted Kathryn for a second, but Kashyk was unpredictable.

At least, that was what he told himself as he picked up his PADD and tried to get some work done.

The Doctor stood in the gray and white grid of the holodeck. There was a primitive body base in front of him. The height was varying from moment to moment, as were the facial features. Oz had not even reached stage of selecting clothes yet, a fact that made the Doctor rather uncomfortable. He was actually there more as an advisor and friend than anything else, since Oz could control by himself the changes that he was making.

Oz was busy looking at the different ways in which he could alter the form. Sometimes the hue of his skin was a deeper shade of blue, sometimes the texture was different, sometimes the horns were longer, shorter, thicker. Oz seemed undecided about the appearance that he should take and was trying out every permutation he could think of, which meant that the Doctor learned much about Sernaix aesthetics... Perhaps too much, in some respects.

Finally, Oz seemed satisfied with the combination of characteristics. He sounded a little nervous as he asked, "What do you think?"

The Doctor walked around the body and nodded. "A fine specimen," he said encouragingly.

Oz seemed proud of his new form. "It is, isn't it?" He called up some clothes for himself. After the indecision of choosing a body for himself, selecting clothing was an easy task. He picked a muted blue pair of trousers and a dull green shirt to go with it, reasoning that his physical appearance was striking enough without extra enhancement in the clothes department. There was a brief pause and then suddenly the body came to life, startling the Doctor a little. Oz looked down at his hands briefly, as if surprised to see a solid form attached to his consciousness, and then gave his body a quick once over to make sure that he could control all his movements. He looked up slowly and the Doctor was struck by the difference in the manner exhibited by Oz and the other Sernaix that Voyager had encountered. Though physically Oz resembled a Sernaix, the air of menace was missing from his yellow-in-black gaze.

Oz was disoriented for a few minutes. Suddenly the virtual world around him had disappeared, leaving behind a very physical reality for him to discover. In a way, the barrage of input was just as overwhelming as the shock of entering Voyager's systems. He had to cope abruptly with the shift from mathematical laws to the laws of physics and he had trouble keeping his balance and regulating his movements. Instead of the easy, simple state of just 'existing,' he had to think about what he was doing, how he would get to places, how to control this new body. The Doctor noticed his discomfort.

"It'll become natural to you. Don't worry," he reassured the uneasy hologram, remembering his and Neelix's attempts to help Seven of Nine reacclimate herself to basic functions such as eating.

Oz drew himself up almost unconsciously. "I'm not worried."

The Doctor nodded understandingly but refrained from making any further comment. "Come along, then... I'll show you around the ship and then we can get you to your quarters." He could see Oz preparing to transfer himself via the computer, but the Doctor stopped him with a hand on his arm. Oz seemed a little stunned at the contact and the Doctor remembered that before this, Oz had not had any kind of contact with anyone except for through his vocal interface for some time, aside from his short stint buried deep in Seven's cortical node processor. "No... There's something to be said for walking rather than 'popping up' in various locations. It makes the crew more comfortable, for starters."

Oz had no objection and allowed himself to be led out of the holodeck. Pesky gravity unfortunately gave him a little pause as he tried to walk, but he soon adjusted to the inconvenience. Soon he could even tear his eyes away from his feet as he was walking, which allowed him to better appreciate the sights that the Doctor was showing him, as well as being conscious of the looks of the various crew members who passed by.

Captain Janeway returned to private quarters at the end of the tour with Kashyk. It had taken a little longer than she had anticipated and she was utterly exhausted. She sighed as she entered the darkened room and shrugged off her jacket. She looked around, hearing soft humming coming from somewhere in the room. She poked her head through the bedroom door and saw Chakotay tidying up a little, placing his uniform in the 'fresher, stowing a few possessions in a drawer. She smiled gently and leaned against the doorframe.

"Busy?"

He looked up, startled from his thoughts. He seemed to use the basic chores to order his mind, just as meditating did when he was troubled.

"Not really."

She sat down for a few moments while she took off her boots and placed them under the bed, letting out a small sigh of relief as her unfortunate feet gained a reprieve from the three-inch torture. He sat down next to her and pulled one of her feet into his lap.

"Here, let me."

He worked her tired foot with his competent, firm fingers, then did the same with the other. She placed her feet on the carpet and flexed her toes cautiously. She smiled a little. "That feels much better. Thank you."

He stood and took her hand. "My pleasure."

She snorted in disbelief. "Not with how they smell after full day walking around, it isn't."

"Believe it or not..." He grinned and helped her up, then led her into the next room. "Dinner?"

She nodded. "That would be wonderful."

He sat her down at the table and lit the candles. Within minutes the table was laid and replicated dishes steamed on the white tablecloth. She dug in happily to the vegetable pie and salad. It struck her that she had not eaten since breakfast and she was ravenous. He seemed less intent on his food, though she was sure that he had not eaten either... She frowned ever so slightly but made no comment. The conversation, though there were efforts on both their parts, seemed brittle and unnaturally loud in the silence of their quarters. He avoided speaking about Kashyk and she did not want to talk about the Sernaix or anything resembling 'shop talk.' There was a faint uncomfortable edge in the air -- nothing too tense or alarming, just vaguely disquieting to both of them.

She helped him clear away the dishes and they retreated to the couch, just sitting in silence for a few, precious minutes when they could leave the ship behind. Suddenly the quiet was no longer awkward. Instead, there was a comfortable stillness as she just curled up, her hand in his.

Finally, he stirred.

"I'm going to bed... I didn't sleep well last night. Are you coming?"

"Not yet... I'm going to stay up for a little while. I need to think. I'll follow you."

His expression did not so much as flicker. She did, however, note that his smile was just a fraction strained. It could have been fatigue...

"All right."

He retreated into the bathroom to get ready quickly and then into the bedroom. He got into bed, missing her for a moment and wondering where her thoughts truly were before telling himself sternly that she sometimes stayed up later than he *without* these histrionics on his part.

His feet were cold.

Kathryn was still curled up with a cushion. She was considering the various possibilities that could occur upon their arrival to the area empty of Sernaix activity. She was not quite sure that she was doing the right thing... not that she would question her decisions before her crew, of course. When Chakotay checked up on her an hour later, she was staring pensively out at the stars.

The Doctor had just finished giving Oz the Grand Tour of Voyager-A. They had reached the crew quarters that had been assigned to Oz with a minimum of curious looks; Oz obviously created less of a stir as time passed and the rumour mill aboard did its work. He looked around the darkened, sparsely decorated room and raised an eyebrow.

"Well, the designers obviously didn't have comfort in mind when they planned the décor," he commented dryly. Oz had no frame of reference and therefore could not offer any such observation, but even he had to concede that there was little besides the basic furniture in the room. He shrugged.

"This is a ship of combat, not a luxury cruiser. Anyway, I'm a hologram.", replied Oz.

"Yes, but that doesn't mean you don't deserve the simple amenities, such as a comfortable chair..."

Oz nodded and tested the mattress on his bed. He looked down at it critically when it did not curve a great deal under the pressure.

"I think I'll probably just go back in the system when I need to rest," he decided eventually. The Doctor appreciated the wisdom of that. He moved to Oz's personal station in his quarters. He switched it on and opened up the unrestricted library. Oz's brow furrowed in puzzlement.

"What's that for?" he asked curiously. "I mean, what's the point of analyzing data in such a slow and painstaking manner? Isn't it just faster to just absorb it from the main computer into your program?"

The Doctor pondered the best way to explain it.

"Sometimes the experience alone is worth having. It's often not enough to just know how to do something or have access to a bit of data. It's important to go through the process of learning it and absorbing it by yourself."

Oz threw him a look of incomprehension.

"But surely it's more efficient..."

The Doctor rolled his eyes slightly. Sometimes Oz sounded just like Seven.

"It may be more efficient, but think of it this way. If you have a pleasant memory... Would you rather just acquire the memory or would you rather live through it yourself?"

Oz nodded slowly.

"I see your point. Yes, I would rather live through it. But what about the unpleasant experiences?"

"Nothing's ever perfect, Oz. It's important to take your bumps because it makes the good times much more special." In spite of the banality of the words, the sentiment was true. The Doctor found himself remembering his holographic family. It was interesting that he had not thought of them in a very long time. Now suddenly he was reminded of his 'daughter' and her death, which had affected him deeply, and eventually made his life richer for the experience. He sat Oz down on the couch and, since the new hologram seemed to want to connect to him on some level, began to tell the story of his dream family.

Janeway shifted in her seat as Voyager dropped out of warp. "Anything, Mr. Kim?"

"Running scans of the area..." Harry answered. "There's an M-class planet on the far edge of our sensors. It could be Ayretha but it's impossible to tell at this distance."

Nodding in acknowledgement, she turned her attention to Tom. "Mr. Paris, set a..."

Tuvok's eyebrow rose as he tapped his console, "Receiving a communication from the planet, Captain."

"On screen," Janeway turned from Tuvok who had caught her attention with the his words and focused on the view screen. The familiar visage of Speaker Mateth appeared, his hands extended in their ritual greeting.

"Welcome to the Eternal home of the Ayrethans once more Captain Janeway." His eyes focused on each of the bridge crew in turn including Kashyk, who held his gaze longer than the rest. "Your crew has ... expanded since your last visit. There are no other vessels."

His gaze seemed to rest on Kashyk again as he spoke. "None, but you would know that since you likely have been scanning us ever since we dropped out of warp." Janeway pulled Mateth's attention back on her with her words. He inclined his head slightly and two unfamiliar ships shimmered into existence on either side of Voyager. "They will escort you to Ayretha, Captain. *You* are welcome to visit us once again." His gaze trailed over Kashyk once more. "I look forward to greeting you again."

Janeway looked from Kashyk to Chakotay. It seemed that Mateth had the same reservations about the Devore as Chakotay did. At this point she didn't have time to pick and choose her allies however.

"You heard him, Mr. Paris." Janeway turned her gaze back to the view screen and the distant planet. "Set a course for Ayretha. Keep us with our honor guard."

Not long after they had set their course, Janeway had retreated to her ready room. The relative silence of her inner sanctum offered her some space to think. Mateth's reaction to Kashyk worried her on two levels. First off they knew that the Ayrethans could withstand, even defeat the Sernaix. If her decision to take up with the Alliance had somehow alienated the Ayrethans, then it was likely her worst miscalculation ever.

She knew the Ayrethans were telepathic. Hell, their entire planet was telepathic if the bond she had shared with Chakotay was any evidence. Could they sense Kashyk's general antipathy towards their kind? Or had they had some encounter with the Devore before the Sernaix had made themselves known? They obviously knew about the Alliance. How much she couldn't guess, but she was inclined to believe if the Ayrethans knew much about the Alliance they'd have more difficulties with allying themselves with this rogues gallery of bandits, cutthroats, and murderers.

Janeway moved away from the viewport and replicated herself a cup of coffee. Taking her first sip immediately, she moved to her desk and sat down considering carefully everything that had happened so far. Desperation made for strange bedfellows and it was easy for the Ayrethans to pass judgment from on high. They were obviously under no true threat from the Sernaix.

So why did it still feel like she'd made the wrong choice when she had agreed to ally herself with the Alliance. They had come to Voyager's rescue. They were waiting just beyond the edge of Ayrethan influence to continue the battle against the Sernaix. That was the other level that bothered her. Was Mateth's reaction to Kashyk because he knew something she didn't?

No matter how she rationalized it, she still couldn't clear those nagging doubts from her mind.

Janeway stood on the transporter platform, ready to beam down to Ayretha.

Alone.

Arriving in orbit around the planet, everyone, especially Chakotay -- having built up some rapport with the Ayrethans on their first visit, had been shocked when Mateth had contacted them again and announced that only Captain Janeway was to beam down to them this time.

Though their previous experiences with the Ayrethans were reassuring, there was something off about their reception this time and neither Tuvok nor Chakotay were happy with the idea of Janeway beaming down alone.

In the end, she had overruled them. The Ayrethans' help was too important to everyone involved to allow blind adherence to regulations stop them. If they would only negotiate with her, so be it. That was the reasoning she allowed her command staff to hear. Deep inside of her the gnawing fear that had kept her pacing her ready room until they had come into orbit motivated her. If something happened to her, then it was her price to pay for her shortsightedness.

The tingling sensation of the transporter beam enveloped her and deposited her smoothly on the surface of Ayretha. Once again she found herself surrounded by the brightly colored foliage and overshadowed by the towering stalori. As her eyes adjusted to the uncommonly bright light, her gaze fell upon a small group of Ayrethans, their bright green skin and yellow frills catching her gaze, even from a distance. Janeway extended her hands, as if showing claws to the Speaker as he approached. "Thank you for inviting me, Speaker."

Mateth returned the greeting and gestured for her to follow him. "Your view point has changed from last we met."

"Indeed, I have found that sometimes the only way to defend my home is to be far from it." Janeway forced herself to follow the etiquette for speaking to the odd aliens that Chakotay had discovered. A part of her screamed in frustration, the Alpha Quadrant was in danger, she needed their help and had little patience for the intricate dance that was required to talk to these beings.

"Frustrating, I am certain for you, Captain. However you seem to have found a place for yourself amongst these stars. Even adapted to them." The flowers that surrounded them were lovely and the arcs of rainbow light were enchanting, but Janeway paid them little attention. Remembering Tom and Icheb's reports, she imagined they must be walking through those same gardens, but now she found herself wishing for the forced telepathic rapport that she and Chakotay had experienced. It would make all of this so much simpler.

"Though we have adapted, we find no comfort in the actions we must take. Our understanding of the enemy is limited and our choices few." Janeway paused wondering if she had come to close to being direct, though Mateth showed no sign to give her a clue one way or another.

A silence fell between them even as they walked until Mateth broke it. "Voyager has changed to a ship of battle and her crew..."

Janeway spun on the Speaker, having had enough of word games and his judgment from on high. "We have done what we have had to do to survive. You people kept a deadly genie locked in a bottle for hundreds of years, allowing innocent travelers to be trapped in your little universe without thought to their plight. You left them to die at the hands of the Sernaix. It is readily

apparent that you have the means to thwart the Sernaix *if* you can be bothered to use it. Instead you simply sit and watch as they destroy each and every one of us. Then you have the unmitigated gall to pass judgment on my ship, my people for using the Sernaix technology against them, for choosing to ally ourselves with other races who are in the same straights as ourselves. They have as much right to survive as we do. As *you* do. What they've done in the past doesn't dictate that they should die at the hands of the Sernaix and while it might be a great comfort to you to pass judgment on us, I refuse to do the same to them." Janeway's hands found her hips and she seemed to become much larger as she regarded Speaker Mateth disdainfully. "My people have a saying, Speaker. Put up or shut up. In other words, if you can't be bothered to help stay the hell out of my way because I'll be damned if your little genie is going to destroy my home or my allies."

Turning her back on Mateth, she stalked past the honor guard that had been trailing them the entire time, making her way back to the beam up point without either his blessing or dismissal. She found the same plot of flowers and tapped her commbadge. The annoying buzzer that indicated no connection was possible sounded and Janeway took a deep breath, wondering if Tuvok and Chakotay's apprehension had been justified after all.

Standing still she watched as Mateth and the others converged on her. Her body tensed as she watched them. Janeway was uncertain what she could do against the lizard like people but she'd be damned if she gave up without a fight. They stopped several meters away and regarded her solemnly. "We will, as you say, 'put up', Captain Janeway." Janeway's posture relaxed and she began to smile, but not before the Speaker's voice sounded again. "But we will choose the time and place for our assistance. Until then, it is your battle to fight."

Janeway's brow furrowed in consternation as she watched the Ayrethans move back along the path they came from. Her fists clenched at her side for a moment, then she tapped her badge once more. This time the sound was that of a connection with Voyager's comm. system.

"Janeway to Voyager. One to beam up."

The atmosphere on the bridge was subdued. Although the Captain's announcement that the Ayrethans would help was welcome, their condition of in their own time made it seem too little, too late. How long would they wait and would they have a home to go to when they did decide to step in seemed to be the question in the forefront of everyone's mind.

That and Kashyk's seemingly smug attitude about the entire situation didn't seem to be helping matters either.

"Dropping out of warp now, Captain," Harry called out as the warp effect cleared from the view screen. Suddenly proximity alert sirens sounded as a Sernaix battlecruiser loomed largely in front of them.

"Battlestations." Janeway's eyes widened at the sight of the monstrosity before them, which was swinging around to face them now. "Shields. Tuvok, target everything we have on them. Seven, find out what happened to the alliance ships." Janeway's glare was focused on Kashyk, until the first volley from the cruiser drew her attention forward again as they lurched from the impact.

"Shields at seventy percent. Targeting all weapons." Tuvok's voice rang out over the din once more. It was like *déjà vu*, only the situation was deadly.

Seven looked towards Janeway, "There is minimal debris. It would seem the Alliance vessels escaped with minimal losses."

"If I have anything to say about it, so will we." Janeway focused on the job at hand. Words with Kashyk would come later and if Chakotay was lucky then he might get his wish at tossing the smug bastard in the brig. "Tom, as soon as Tuvok fires, engage the slipstream. Get us as far away from here as we can get."

Tom swiveled slightly. "There's a danger with engaging the slipstream too close to another..."

Janeway stilled his protest with a raised hand as another volley shook the ship and tossed her across the console that separated her and her first officer. She didn't have to say anything further as Tom lifted himself back into his seat and plotted their retreat course. "Aye, Captain."

"Shields at sixty percent and dropping..." Tuvok announced once more.

Janeway pulled herself up, standing before her seat. "Fire..."

A rainbow of light spilled from various points over the ship, arcing towards their intended target. Each impacting on the shimmering black vessel, creating small explosions along her hull.

"Now..." Janeway began to order when suddenly they were once again surrounded by the Alliance vessels dropping out of warp. Every weapon in the vast armada targeted on the same line in the hull where Voyager's weapons had hit previous. For a moment there seemed to be no effect, then suddenly explosions seemed to course through the enemy vessel. Starting along the extended tips of their drives and rippling back into the core of the ship. Then in a dazzling green gold explosion it disappeared from the screen, leaving only Voyager and the Alliance behind.

Kashyk looked out toward the decimated vessel then back to towards Janeway. "As we said, you gain our protection, Captain."

Chakotay found himself moving back toward the bridge after taking his after battle tour of the ship alone once again. He was deep in thought, not an unusual occurrence these days. This time however, Kathryn wasn't busily working out the mysteries of the Sernaix strategy while he walked the corridors alone. She was closeted with Kashyk alone, ironing out the details of their inclusion into the Alliance. From the details he had access to it seemed Kathryn would be stepping into the position of second in command of the Alliance in order to ensure that their interests were protected. A position that didn't please the Krenim, but that they had grudgingly agreed to.

He almost bumped into a crewman and apologized quickly before going on his way. He was looking down at his PADD, but he was not paying close attention to the data on it. In fact, he was positively distracted from it as his thoughts wandered. He eventually gave up the pretense, particularly as it was becoming difficult to walk, and just allowed his thoughts free rein.

Kashyk bothered him. Chakotay was not even sure if Janeway was aware of how matters seemed between them, but occasionally caught between the two, he occasionally detected an almost electric tension between them. The verbal sparring that was so commonplace between the two reluctant allies disturbed him in a way that was quite illogical. He forced the thoughts aside. Surely their gazes did not meet too often to be out of line. And if Kashyk's mouth drew close to Kathryn's ear to make a soft, wry comment to draw a laugh from her, it was absolutely not her fault. He was being too sensitive.

He heard voices in the corridor and realized that the objects of his thoughts were coming closer. He stiffened ever so slightly then relaxed. He was not eavesdropping. He just happened to be in the vicinity.

"Well, Captain, I hope that you have had an interesting, if not productive, stay aboard my ship." There was a subtle emphasis on the "my" that made it clear that Voyager was completely, incontrovertibly hers. She quirked an eyebrow at him and Kashyk smiled slightly.

"Indeed, Captain. Although I'm not sure which was more... 'interesting'... the upgrades or the company."

"Yes, how was your evening with gamma security team, Captain?"

He laughed and shook his head. He became serious a moment later, however, and fixed his dark gaze on her, stopping their slow walk down the corridor.

"Couldn't we drop the titles for just a moment, Kathryn?"

Chakotay bristled ever so slightly at Kashyk's use of her name.

"I don't think that would be appropriate, Captain."

"Perhaps we could reevaluate the term 'appropriate' over dinner," he continued smoothly. "I have an impressive collection of new music... Perhaps you would enjoy a change from Mahler and Tchaikovsky and experiment instead with the style of my people."

She looked around briefly and for a moment, Chakotay was afraid that he would be discovered behind the bend in the hallway. He kicked himself for invading her privacy, but he needed to hear this as much as Kathryn needed to resolve it.

"Kashyk..."

"Kathryn...?"

"I'm involved with someone," she said bluntly. Kashyk did not seem especially taken aback and Chakotay feared that it would not end there.

"Really? I haven't heard you mention -- him? -- before..."

"It's not something that I discuss freely with dubious allies."

"Candour as always, Captain. I must say, I'm charmed."

She had clearly had enough of his sidestepping and his oily manner.

"Frankly, I don't care, Captain. I work with you because I have to, but I won't extend our relationship into the personal. You, sir, have allied yourself with an organization guilty of extradition, torture, and genocide. That is completely distasteful to me. In addition to that, and this would stand even if you were not a former Devore inspector, I would not so dishonor my partner, whom I care very deeply about." Her speech became more formal as her tone became icier. Chakotay felt something loosen in his chest as he heard those words. He swallowed and backed slowly down the corridor, not wanting to be caught listening and; though it was too late already; not wanting to invade her privacy any more than he had.

Janeway escorted Kashyk in silence to the transporter room. She waited as he stepped up on to the transporter platform.

"Good evening, Captain," he said coolly. "Have I at least earned some measure of your trust?"

"No." The word was harsh and brief. "Goodbye, Captain." She nodded to the transporter chief and Kashyk dissolved in a pillar of light.

Janeway looked to her left and once again felt a rush of warmth from Chakotay's silent support. She stood slowly and moved forward. "Open a channel ship wide, Mr. Kim."

"We now have unexpected allies in our fight against the Sernaix. Once these races were our enemies, now they are our allies. Much like two groups that came together to find their way home..." She smiled at each of the original Voyager crewman that sat in their places around the bridge. "This won't be easy on either side, but I know we can make this work. Just as we did last time." She paused. "Whenever tensions rise I ask you to remember just one thing -- that we all have a common goal... To save our homes from the Sernaix."

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